

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

2101 CONSTITUTION AVENUE, WASHINGTON, D. C. 20418

OFFICE OF INFORMATION

12 July 1968

Professor Joshua Lederberg  
Department of Genetics  
Stanford University School of Medicine  
Stanford Medical Center  
Palo Alto, California 94304

Dear Professor Lederberg:

I am happy to enclose a copy of the report of the Subcommittee on Human Response of the Committee on SST-Sonic Boom. Our routine in publicizing reports of this nature is to send out a dozen copies or so to a specially selected list of science writers and a press release to a broader list with an offer to send copies for their perusal as long as the supply lasts. We customarily send to Harold Schmeck and/or Walter Sullivan at the Times.

I must confess my chagrin when I learn that you have not been receiving our news releases regularly; please be assured that your name will quickly be added to our mailing list. If time permits, we would rather have you select the reports you wish to receive as you are notified of their issuance. But if time is a factor, we will be glad to send you regularly those of more than passing interest.

You are also interested in talking about the more general aspects of communicating science information through the mass media, and so am I. As you know, there was a period shortly after the first Sputnik when the National Science Foundation was happy to support almost any conference of scientists and science writers to talk about the need for greater public understanding of science and the problems that arose in the communications process. It is likely that these dialogues resulted in a heightened awareness in each of the other's problems, but whether this new awareness resulted in better communications still remains to be proved.

You look upon the main problem as the authentication of scientific reports for earlier publication in the mass media, and wonder how appropriate scientific criticism can be brought to bear on reports for which detailed documentation is lacking. I would rather not deal with that problem, simply because I do not think there is a solution. Unavailable documentation cannot be evaluated.

Further, even if a technique was found that would permit critical evaluation before publication in the mass media, is this really the way to handle the problem of the antiquated journal? Most of the bench scientists I talk to in the Academy report that they get very little information from the news media in the area of their own professional interests. When I ask whether there isn't at least sufficient information in the news article to enable them to determine whether or not they want to pursue the matter further, the answer often is that the news article is so garbled or so truncated that it is impossible to tell whether or not the reported advance is significant.

I feel that there are really two problems here. There is the problem of publication lag among the journals. But John Maddox of Nature has instituted a plan in that journal that permits the publication in the June 15, 1968, issue of articles received in April and of letters received as late as May 21. He has accomplished this by establishing a network of paid reviewers, some of whom are in the universities and some, I understand, are actually on the staff of the journal. Granted that the economics of publishing and of the scientific enterprise are different in England, I wonder if our journals simply don't need a bit of shaking up.

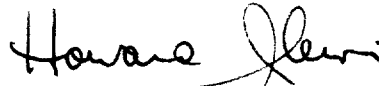
The second problem, of course, is the competence of the science writers in the mass media. Like you, I should like to have this correspondence off the record, for I feel that the vast majority of them are neither good communicators of science or good reporters (and there is an important difference!) The crux of the problem, in my view, lies in the fact that science reporters, unlike sports reporters or business reporters, are not subject to critical review by their readers. Ironically, however, the field that they cover is far more demanding of excellence than either sports or business. In this, the science writer resembles most closely the foreign correspondent -- and it is in these two fields that the American public is worst informed.

(One way to illustrate the difference between the demands made on the sports reporter and on the science reporter is to compare what has to be explained to the reader. As you are well aware, DNA has to be defined

anew each time it is used. On the other hand, I made a quick survey of the front page of the New York Times Sunday Sports Section a couple of weeks ago and was delighted to discover that in only one out of ten front-page articles did the reporter feel any compulsion to name the sport he was describing. An article about a Davis Cup elimination round did not once use the word "tennis"; a report of a contest between the Mets and the Dodgers did not include the word "baseball." It isn't necessary.)

I have been thinking some more about the assignment for the Washington Post, but I prefer to make that the subject of another letter.

Very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Howard J. Lewis".

Howard J. Lewis  
Director  
Office of Information

HJL:ca  
Enclosure